



# The Quiltmaker

## A Parable

By Ann L. Randall

“What an amazing quilt!” I exclaimed as I stood in the doorway of the old craftsman’s shop.

He looked up at me and smiled. “Every one is different,” he commented as he nodded at the quilts displayed around the room. “Come in, have a look. I don’t mind.”

I stepped inside and approached his bench. Then I could see clearly that every piece of the quilt under his needle was shaped differently. Every piece was made of differently patterned fabric. And every piece was joined to the next by intricate needlework. Appliques of leaves or vines adorned some of the seams, sometimes reaching out in exquisite patterns to embellish an entire piece. I gasped, “This must be worth a bundle!”

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“Oh, it is!” he responded, “More than you could afford. This isn’t a store — just a workshop. But don’t be embarrassed. Many people make that mistake when they see the window displays. I’ve had some visitors who wouldn’t take ‘No’ for an answer and came back later to raid the shop, but it never worked out well for them.”

His comment puzzled me, and I was about to ask him what he meant, when he continued, “For one thing, not one of these quilts is quite finished. And then there’s the problem of ownership. Thieves don’t really own what they take, do they? They may think it’s theirs, but they’ve fooled themselves.”

Then he was silent for a while and seemed so bent on his work that I said no more and began to walk around the workshop, marveling at how each quilt was unique and yet so lovely. The afternoon sun streaming in the windows filled the room with warmth and highlighted the colors, fabrics, and stitching on each work of art.

Finally, I stepped up close to the workbench, and the craftsman looked up and smiled again, giving me the courage to ask, “Can I touch it?”

“This one? Of course! You have to feel it to realize just how remarkable it is.”

When I grasped a handful of the quilt, I understood. Each piece seemed to be a different type of material — some smooth and fine, others coarse and a bit rough, which emphasized the unusual character of the whole. And the stitching, the embroidery, the appliques were all of exceptional thread and fabric — satiny yet strong. Then I noticed that the border of the quilt was unfinished, and I picked up one side and started to turn it over.

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“Be careful there,” the craftsman warned, “I don’t want you to be too shocked.”

I glanced up at him with questioning eyes, then looked down and was indeed surprised. For the reverse side of the patchwork piece was filled with pictures. Pictures of people I knew. I quickly lifted the edge of the quilt and threw it back. And there I saw, under each patch, the people and places that had marked my life. My children, my neighbors, my friends. The bosses I’d worked for — good and difficult. And as I looked back at the craftsman, my eyes filled with tears.

“This is me,” I whispered. “You are making the quilt of my life.”

“Oh no,” he answered. “*You* are making the pieces of the quilt. *I’m* just doing the seaming and mending to fit them together. It makes me sad to know how many people think their lives are a box of prefab pieces that I gave them, and their lifework is to fit those pieces into a whole.” He frowned and shook his head, “As if I were the one who made all the decisions and then sat back with folded arms, watching to see if they could solve the puzzle!”

“But that’s what I was taught,” I protested, “that the blueprint for my life was a done deal, and I just had to figure it out and follow it.”

The old man looked at me with compassion in his eyes. “It’s the opposite. *I’m* not the one who makes the pieces, expecting you to try to stitch them together. *You’re* the one who makes the pieces. I just do the needlework to help you join them into a beautiful quilt.”

He put down his needle for a moment and said solemnly, “What makes these quilts so special is that each one is created by a different artist. Each is one of a kind. Why would

I want to make something that is just a container for myself? And I certainly wouldn't want to merge all these quilts into one homogeneous bale. I want **others** — not more of me. I want a busy house full of individuals I can talk to, work with, laugh with — not a hall of mirrors.”

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“And about those thieves,” he continued. “You can see the problem now. Nobody can really own these quilts except each individual who is making them. Many have tried to possess the quilts of others, but instead it just spoils their own. I track every quilt that’s stolen, and I come by every day to do my mending and seaming.” He paused a moment, then added, rather sternly, “Folks who want to loot quilts and take charge of their construction won’t like my house, because nobody there can control anyone else.”

The old workman picked up his needle again, but as he returned to his work he mused, “Wouldn’t it be dull if all the quilts were the same pattern? It’s the differences that make each one so appealing, you see. Then his face burst into a huge smile and he chuckled, “My house is a place full of *others*. Isn’t that wonderful?”

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**Author’s Note:** *The image of a craftsman making quilts came to me in the middle of the night, between dreams. The rest of the story seemed to write itself, no doubt influenced by my recent reading of the Outlook articles “Reflections on the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches” and “The Son Shall Make Us Free.” In the story I see God as the great “I AM” engaging in a true “I–Thou” relationship with human others as his Thou.*

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